WHERE DID “THE ONES WHO WALKED AWAY FROM OMELAS” GO? : OMELAS ABOVE AND BEYOND

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“Utopia” is a term for an imaginary place in which everything is perfect, symbolizing people’s hopes and dreams in an “ideal life”. For so long, human beings have imagined worlds that are heaven-like, free of all negative aspects of real life. But, there is this term called “dystopia” which contradicts utopia and all the elements that it has. Dystopia is an unreal society or state where there is great agony, injustice, and discomfort. In literature, many of the authors have used utopic and dystopic elements while writing their works and one of them is Ursula K. Le Guin. In her short philosophical fiction “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”, Ursula uses both of the elements. Although critics say that this work can be classified as neither utopia nor dystopia, it includes utopic society based upon dystopic events which can be associated with real life happenings.

“With a clamor of bells that set the swallows soaring, the Festival of Summer came to the city Omelas, bright-towered by the sea...In other streets, the music beat faster, a shimmering of gong and tambourine, and the people went dancing, the procession was a dance...The air of morning was so clear that the snow still crowning the Eighteen Peaks burned with white-gold fire across the miles of sunlit air, under the dark blue of the sky (Le Guin, 1996, p. 1).”

“The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” starts with eloquent depictions of the utopic city, Omelas. The narrator focuses on the summer festival in a bright and clear day. Music is playing and all the people of the town seem to enjoy what they are doing. Boys and girls wait with their ornamented for a race to begin Happiness seem to be dominating the streets. However, the narrator insists that the people of Omelas live complicated lives. This opening part portrays a place in which everyone is delighted. The scene also focuses on the children of Omelas and their innocent childhood.

“Joyous! How is one to tell about joy? How describe the citizens of Omelas? They were not simple folk, you see, though they were happy. But we do not say the words of cheer much anymore. All smiles have become archaic (Le Guin, 1996, p. 1).”

At this point, the narrator realizes the difficulty of describing Omelas’s happiness. In this part, Omelas seems to belong in a fairy tale because “all smiles have become archaic.” The narrator shows the idea that people of Omelas are mature, living full lives. These people have
come to the level of an understanding of what is necessary, what is destructive and what is both or neither. We are introduced to the concepts of necessity and destructiveness. The narrator explicitly wants the reader to use their imagination to fill in the details of Omelas.

“O miracle! but I wish I could describe it better. I wish I could convince you. Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time. Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly, I cannot suit you all...One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt. But what else should there be? I thought at first there were no drugs, but that is puritanical (Le Guin, 1996, p. 2).”

However, the themes of Happiness and Suffering continue to be mixed up when the narrator considers the presence of drugs and war in Omelas. The narrator stresses the imagination of pleasure without the destruction of drugs and victory’s existence in Omelas thus showing one of the story’s moral lessons that happiness consistently exists in relation to suffering. The narrator continues telling the breathtaking scenery of the festival.

“There are a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door and no window. A little light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards, second-hand from a cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar. In one corner of the little room a couple of mops, with stiff, clotted, foul-smelling heads, stand near a rusty bucket. The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is. The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room, a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect (Le Guin, 1996, p. 3).”

Then the narrator moves from the festival and then starts telling about a child in the basement. This child is depicted as neglected even referred to as “it”. He or she is alone in the room. This room is filled with dirty things. Until this part, the narrator has told about the happiness of Omelas as a whole but, on the contrary, there is a suffering individual. The child goes through suffering in all parts of its life.
“The people at the door never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and its mother’s voice, sometimes speaks. “I will be good,” it says. “Please let me out. I will be good! They never answer (Le Guin, 1996, p. 3).”

In this part, the child remembers his or her mother's voice and also sunlight in which the story turns itself into a relationship between suffering and happiness again. He or she wants to be heard by other people but the child’s cries indicate abject loneliness. After showing this contradiction, the narrator states that although everyone in Omelas knows this child, no one really does anything to help the child.

“Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality and to accept it. Yet it is their tears and anger, the trying of their generosity and the acceptance of their helplessness, which are perhaps the true source of the splendor of their lives. Theirs is no vapid, irresponsible happiness. They know that they, like the child, are not free. They know compassion. It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science. It is because of the child that they are so gentle with children (Le Guin, 1996, p. 4).”

The information of the enduring kid powers the natives of Omelas to perceive the interrelated idea of joy and suffering. In this section, the storyteller clarifies that, in any event in Omelas, joy can't exist without anguish, and that tolerating this the truth is the way one grows up and really joins the society.

“Sometimes also a man or woman much older falls silent for a day or two and then leaves home. These people go out into the street and walk down the street alone. ...They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl man or woman. ... They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas (Le Guin, 1996, p. 4).”

Le Guin closes the story by presenting independence in another manner: through the troublesome choice made by "the ones who leave." Though residents are unfit to change the structure that requires the youngster to languish over the city's joy, natives can withdraw with Omelas society by and large by leaving Omelas. It is impossible for the reader and narrator to
imagine what lies beyond Omelas implies that it is impossible for humans to imagine a society without unjust suffering.

As it is mentioned, this short story contains lots of themes. One of them is “individual and society”. The utopian city of Omelas depends on the social agreement according to which everyone must agree with the fact that their happiness relies on a child's suffering. Those who cannot agree with this leave the city on foot. Their destination is unknown, lost in mystery. The story, therefore, represents a dilemma and also a problematic question: is it morally justifiable to impose suffering on one person in the benefit of others’ happiness? Each citizen here left alone to decide their fate. If the feeling of guilt overcomes them, their sole choice is to reject the society of Omelas by walking away from the city and finding their individual fate.

When the narrator reveals that the society's happiness depends on the suffering of a child, all appearance of the perfect society vanishes. The children are also left to choose between ignoring the presence of the child or leave Omelas. Most children, however, keep on living as if there is nothing is wrong. Also, most people choose society over the individual. Le Guin does not say whether what those who left Omelas did was right or wrong. She does not talk about whether they were awarded or punished for what they did.

Another emphasized theme is “happiness and suffering”. The condition of Omelas’ society is that in order for society to be happy, a child must suffer. Since this is knitted, Le Guin states that understanding suffering is an essential part of becoming happy. Also, the people of Omelas understand that good things in their lives are made possible by this child. They also understand that they are not free like the child.

To conclude, “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” is a story where utopia and dystopia are blended together. Omelas at the beginning is depicted as a utopic society in which everyone is happy with their lives. But with later parts, we do understand that this society has a dystopic event which is also ironic. We should just think and ask ourselves these questions: Would I live happily even if my happiness depended on a child's suffering? Would I leave Omelas or stay in there? What would I do to save the child from suffering? We should and must think about this story and try to understand the meanings and the messages of it.

WORKS CITED